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SUBJECT: HARPER GOVERNMENT ADVANCES ITS AGENDA... FOR NOW

REF: A. OTTAWA 1961

-- B. OTTAWA 1928

-- C. OTTAWA 1924

¶1. (SBU) Summary: With the opposition Liberal party abstaining on another key confidence vote on October 31, the Harper government continues aggressively to push its policy agenda in Parliament. Key legislation that Prime Minister Harper promised in the Speech from the Throne (ref c) - on terrorism, crime, and intellectual property rights, among others - should move forward quickly as the Liberals have similarly indicated that they would not block these measures. Prospects of an election before the December 14 Christmas recess are now virtually zero, although an unexpected snap vote is always in the realm of possibility. The Liberals and other opposition parties will probably use the holidays to canvass around the country seeking the right issue on which to bring down the government and face the electorate, perhaps next year. End summary

LIBERALS AGAIN SIT ON THEIR HANDS

¶2. (SBU) On October 30, the government delivered a voter-friendly, tax-cutting fall Economic Statement that included a cut to the national sales tax that the Liberals vehemently oppose, and then scheduled a snap confidence vote on October 31 to approve the Statement. As with the final vote on the Throne Speech on October 24 (ref b), the Bloc Qubcois and New Democratic Party (NDP) voted against the motion, while the Official Opposition Liberal Party abstained en masse and allowed the measure to pass.

¶3. (SBU) The Liberals had earlier also indicated they will not oppose the government's omnibus Tackling Violent Crime bill (ref a), and on October 26 acquiesced in a government motion to form a special legislative committee to speed the bill through committee

hearings, likely without amendment, and report back to the lower house by November 22. (In the previous session, the Liberals had vocally opposed provisions to tighten restrictions on dangerous offenders.) Liberal leader Stphane Dion has further pledged not to oppose legislation to amend the immigration security certificate system to detain non-citizens on national security grounds (ref a). Liberal justice critic Ujjal Dosanjh separately indicated that the Liberals will approach "with no preconceived notions or bias" a bill to restore special powers in the Anti-Terrorism Act that lapsed in March due to lack of support from the Liberals and other opposition parties.

HARPER TWISTS THE KNIFE

¶4. (SBU) Dion again defended the party's abstention tactic by claiming that "Canadians do not want an election," which would mark the third federal vote in three-and-a-half years. However, there is already grumbling within the Liberal party about Dion's lack of strong leadership and the new and apparently unprecedented practice of "whipped abstentions." PM Harper taunted Dion in the Commons as the "King of abstention," while NDP leader Jack Layton has begun to refer to Dion as Harper's unwitting "coalition partner."

UNLIKELY TO LAST

15. (SBU) All parties nonetheless appear to be watching for the right moment and best issue to trigger a new election, but obvious prospects of that happening in 2007 are now virtually zero, so strategists across the spectrum are looking at 2008 possibilities. The Liberals - having already effectively yielded on the Speech from the Throne, the economy/tax cuts, crime, and national security, and also likely to allow a new copyright bill to pass in November - now see the environment and use of the federal spending power in areas of exclusive provincial jurisdiction as potential issues, but the Liberals "own" neither of these files, nor are these issues proven Liberals "own" neither of these files, nor are these issues proven vote-getters for them. The creation of the Manley panel to review Afghanistan options has given the government at least three more months of breathing space on that contentious issue. The Liberals generally score more highly among voters than the Conservatives on social policy, particularly child-care, and on aboriginal affairs, making these issues potential hills on which to take a stand, but they are not top-of-the-mind for the average voter.

16. (SBU) According to one respected pollster, the Conservatives desperately need to find an election issue that will appeal to uncommitted women voters if they wish to move from minority to majority status in the next election, but the key issues of concern to these voters - health care and education - are not natural ones for the Conservatives, or even primarily federal priorities.

17. (SBU) The lower house is scheduled for a six-week recess beginning on December 14, reconvening on January 28. The most obvious possible trigger for an election is the federal budget in February or March. However, parliamentary rules allot twenty-two days per calendar year among the opposition parties to debate and vote on a topic of their choosing. The Liberals could theoretically

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use one of these days unexpectedly to move a formal vote of non-confidence to defeat the government, or support the non-confidence motion of a third party. It is possible that the government could then fall with a whimper rather than a bang on a minor detail or on an issue that no one can yet accurately foresee.

18. (SBU) The Liberals in particular -- but also all other parties including the Conservatives -- will likely be in an intense listening mood in their constituencies over the holiday recess in order to pinpoint the issue that might best resonate with voters. They will also want to assess the patience of their workers and the public for maintaining the status quo for some time to come, or, alternatively, their enthusiasm for biting the bullet and facing elections. The Liberals' decision may ultimately have more to do with their internal leadership dynamics, growing embarrassment at their Parliamentary impotence, or other internal party politics than with policy. While the Conservatives currently are benefiting from the Liberals' stance as they advance their legislative agenda, their ambitions to form a majority government -- emboldened by continued good if not outstanding poll results -- will likely lead them to try to tip this balance by the velocity of their taunts against Dion.

WILKINS